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Normative Reasons without (Good) Reasoning

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Normative Reasons without (Good) Reasoning*

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According to the good reasoning view of normative reasons, p is a reason to F , just in case p is a premise of a good pattern of reasoning. This article presents two counterexamples to the most promising version of the good reasoning view.

I. THE GOOD REASONING VIEW

According to an increasingly popular view, normative reasons, that is, the considerations that speak in favor of some response, are defined/explained in terms of good patterns of reasoning.¹ The focus of this article

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1. Recent defenses of the good reasoning view of reasons include Kieran Setiya, *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kieran Setiya, "What Is a Reason to Act?," *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 221–35; Jonathan Way, "Reasons as Premises of Good Reasoning," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98 (2017): 251–70; Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way, "Fittingness First," *Ethics* 126 (2016): 575–606; and Samuel Asarnow, "The Reasoning View and Defeasible Practical Reasoning," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95 (2017): 614–36. The view is not new, though. Classic defenses of this general sort of approach include Joseph Raz, introduction to *Practical Reasoning*, ed. Joseph Raz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1–17; Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," reprinted in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chap. 8, 101–13; and Pamela Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (2005): 437–57, among others.

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is specifically on what appears to be the most promising recent version of the reasoning view of normative reasons, (RV), according to which “for *that p* to be a reason for a response is for *that p* to be a premise of a good pattern of reasoning from fitting responses to that response.”²

In this article I aim to show that (RV), as elaborated by McHugh and Way, faces two as-yet-unnoticed but fundamental counterexamples. These two arise given two of McHugh and Way’s (independently plausible) commitments in particular. The first commitment is the claim that reasoning is a transition from premise responses to conclusion responses of a certain sort. According to them, “This transition is such that the conclusion response counts as based on, or held in the light of, the premise responses.”³ The second commitment is the claim that all normative reasons are contents of possible true beliefs or of other fitting premise responses. According to McHugh and Way, a fitting belief is a true belief. They don’t require that all of the relevant premise responses are actually held by the subject for the content of the relevant premise responses to be normative reasons for the subject in question. (RV) focuses on patterns of reasoning. (RV) requires that all of the relevant premise responses are fitting and are part of a good pattern of reasoning—that is, that there is a possible reasoning (for a given subject) from the relevant (not necessarily actually held) fitting premise responses to the relevant conclusion responses that respects the criteria for a good pattern of reasoning. How exactly the good patterns of reasoning are defined is not crucial for our purposes here.

II. OBJECTION FROM MOORE-PARADOXICAL BELIEFS

The first of our counterexamples appeals to possible considerations of the Moore-paradoxical form. Consider the following example. The fact that (*r*) “the building is on fire, but John doesn’t believe that the building is on fire” is, intuitively, a reason for John to check/consider/reconsider/investigate the hypothesis (*h*) “the building is on fire.” Yet, there is no possible good pattern of reasoning for John from a fitting belief in (*r*) to reconsidering/investigation/etc. of (*h*). This is so simply because it is not possible for John to have a fitting belief that the building is on fire and that he doesn’t believe that the building is on fire. John cannot have a fitting belief that (*r*) because it is impossible for such a belief to be true. One cannot truly believe that the building is on fire and that one doesn’t believe that the building is on fire. The belief in the first conjunct contradicts the belief in the second. On the (RV) account, given that John cannot (in any sense) have a true belief in (*r*), (*r*) cannot possibly be a reason for any response from him. However, it appears pretheoretically plausible

2. McHugh and Way, “Fittingness First,” 586; emphasis slightly modified.

3. McHugh and Way, “Fittingness First,” 586.

to think that (*r*) speaks in favor of some response for John. Given that the fittingness requirement is central for (RV), the Moore-paradoxical beliefs constitute a non-negligible challenge for the reasoning view.

III. OBJECTION FROM SELF-UNDERMINING BELIEFS

The second sort of counterexample appeals to the possibility of other self-undermining beliefs. The fact that (*p*) “I just took a drug that erased all of my memories about the past five minutes” is, intuitively, a reason for me to suspend judgment about what I did in these past five minutes (assuming that I haven’t learned anything new after that yet). However, to suspend judgment about what I did in these past five minutes entails suspending judgment about whether I took the memory-erasing drug. But there is no good pattern of reasoning from a belief that *p* toward a suspension of judgment about *p*. Such a transition (if possible) doesn’t satisfy the basic criteria for reasoning. In fact, McHugh and Way define reasoning as a transition where the conclusion response is held in the light, or on the basis, of the premise response. In this case, however, I cannot base my suspension about *p* on my belief that *p*. To suspend judgment about whether I took the memory-erasing drug cannot be based on the belief that I took the memory-erasing drug. At the very moment when I would suspend the judgment, I would lose the basis for the suspension, and it would not count as being held in the light of the relevant premise response. It is not possible to believe that *p* and at the same time to suspend judgment about *p*. If the fact that I just took a drug that erased all of my memories about the past five minutes is a reason for me to suspend judgment about what I did during these past five minutes, then (RV) must be false, since it entails that it cannot be a reason for me to suspend judgment.